Europe’s Largest News Aggregator Orders Editors to Play Down Palestinian Deaths

Upday, an app owned by the German media giant Axel Springer, is instructing journalists to cover the war in Gaza with a pro-Israel bent.

Daniel Boguslaw
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As Israeli bombing raids virtually eliminated internet access in the Gaza Strip over the weekend, one of the largest media companies in Europe was pushing its own initiative to limit online news about civilian casualties in Palestine.

Upday, the largest news aggregator app in Europe, handed down directives to color the company’s coverage of the war in Gaza with pro-Israel sentiment, according to interviews with employees and internal documents obtained by The Intercept.

Leadership at Upday, a subsidiary of the Germany-based publishing giant Axel Springer, gave instructions to prioritize the Israeli perspective and minimize Palestinian civilian deaths in coverage, according to the employees.

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“We can’t push anything involving Palestinian death tolls or casualties without information about Israel coming higher up in the story,” an employee told The Intercept, referring to push notifications, the alerts sent to millions of phones. The employees, who asked for anonymity to protect their livelihoods, said there was widespread discomfort throughout the company over the moves.

“We strongly contest the indirect allegations you make,” said Julia Sommerfeld, a representative for the German-based Axel Springer. “Neither have we directed our journalists to ignore civilian casualties in Gaza, nor have we asked our editors to manipulate news coverage, nor was corporate management involved in any editorial decisions. Upday’s editorial guidelines are based on journalistic principles and the (publicly available) Axel Springer Essentials” — a reference to a company statement of values.

Sommerfeld said, “The Upday news coverage follows these principles, and each editorial decision is taken by trained journalists.”

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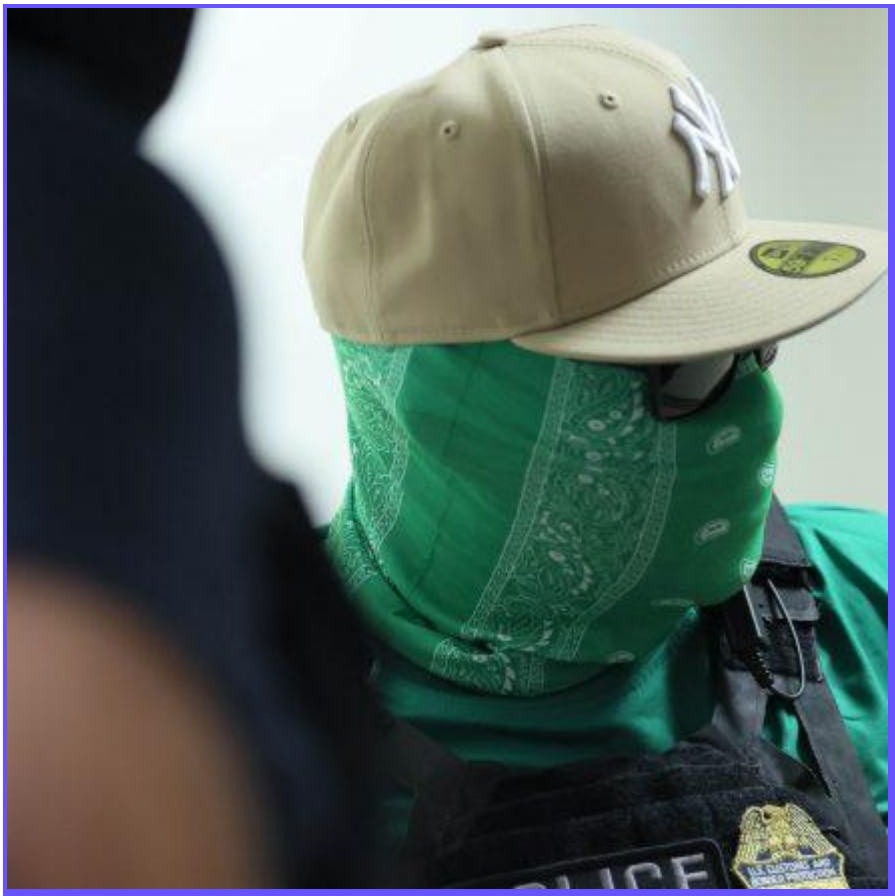

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Top Upday officials' high regard for Israel was apparent in everyday communications: In the company's Slack, an Israeli flag appears beside the avatar of Upday's CEO Thomas Hirsch, according to the employees. (Upday did not respond to The Intercept's direct request for comment.)

"There is a very absurd media push for really dismissing and invisibilizing any Palestinian sympathy," said Ahlam Muhtaseb, a professor of media studies at California State University, San Bernardino, when asked about Upday's internal directives. "The one-sided Israeli victimhood narrative demands buy-in from media institutions and the U.S. government itself."

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In its directives, Upday warned its employees not to publish any headlines that could be “misconstrued” as pro-Palestinian, according to the two employees interviewed by The Intercept. Comments made by Israeli politicians dehumanizing Palestinians were to be couched in language emphasizing the magnitude and brutality of Hamas’s attacks on Israel, which have so far led to more than 1,300 deaths, including many civilians.

One of the directives was to not quote Palestinian militant groups in headlines.

According to the employees, the company gave instructions to — in line with Axel Springer’s “Essentials” mission statement— support Jewish people and Israel’s right to exist.

Upday and Media Bias

First released in 2016, Upday serves more than 30 countries. The app boasts tens of millions of users thanks to a deal with Samsung that preloads the app onto Samsung devices.

Axel Springer publishes the German newspapers Bild and Die Welt, and the Polish tabloid Fakt, among numerous other European titles.

In the U.S. the company holds a majority stake in the news site Insider and purchased Politico in 2021.

Axel Springer has taken criticism for operating its news empire by conservative principles. Among its well-known stances are its ardent support of the Israeli state, explicitly laid out in the "Essentials" mission statement professing support of a "united Europe," the "trans-Atlantic alliance," and "the Jewish people and the right of existence of the State of Israel."

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As principles from Axel Springer's "Essentials" were applied at Upday during the current conflagration in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, they became directives relevant to tasks like headline writing — which, since it is a news aggregator, the company has editorial control over.

Upday's slanted approach reflects a widespread bias among Western media giants that has existed for years but intensified with Hamas's brutal surprise attack.

At MSNBC, the American cable news network, three Muslim news anchors were removed from their anchor chairs, according to a report. (MSNBC denied the allegations.) Other news organizations have taken public action to censor or expel reporters who stand accused of violating internal guidelines or violating journalistic ethics.

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The BBC suspended six journalists while it investigates whether they posted purportedly anti-Israel statements on social media. The British network was also forced to apologize to viewers for misleading information depicting pro-Palestinian protests in the U.K.

as “pro-Hamas.” The Guardian, a British newspaper, recently fired a decadeslong veteran cartoonist after critics decried a depiction of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as antisemitic.

Muhtaseb, the California State University professor, said the German state’s vociferous pro-Israel stance could play a role in shaping Axel Springer’s pro-Israel line, citing the “decision of the German government to criminalize BDS” — the movement for boycott, divestment, and sanctions against Israel for violation of Palestinian rights — “and discourse in support of Palestinians and to equate any anti-Zionist critique with anti-Semitism.”